

## DEFENDING THE BIBLE'S POSITION ON PRAYER

Kyle Butt, M.A.

In their efforts to discredit the Bible, skeptics often attack its teachings concerning prayer. They claim that certain statements made by Jesus regarding prayer can be proven to be inaccurate, and thus all rational people should reject both Jesus and the Bible. Skeptics routinely quote Jesus' words, "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:14). After quoting this verse, the skeptic usually mentions praying parents who asked God, in the name of Jesus, to save their sick children; but the children died in spite of the prayer. The skeptic then argues that the children's death is proof positive that Jesus was a liar and His statements about prayer cannot be true. In addition to John 14:14, skeptics often use Matthew 21:22 in a very similar way. In fact, Dan Barker, during the audience question and answer period in our debate, quoted this verse: "And all things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (Butt and Barker, 2009). According to the skeptic, if a person asks for a million dollars every day, truly believes in his heart that he will get it, and tacks the name of Jesus on the end of the prayer, then if God does not answer that prayer, Jesus lied and the Bible is false.

Is it true that the Bible's teaching on prayer cannot be reconciled with

what we see happening in daily life? Did Jesus make false statements to His disciples about the efficacy of prayer? Is the skeptic's interpretation of Jesus' statements accurate and justified? The answer to these questions is a resounding "No." An honest, critical look at the Bible's teachings regarding prayer reveals that its teachings are internally consistent and correspond perfectly with reality.

### QUALIFYING A STATEMENT

Most of us understand the concept of attaching qualifying remarks to a statement. For instance, hypothetical syllogisms constructed with "if-then" clauses are good examples of qualification. Suppose a person named Bill makes the statement: "If John works for eight hours, then I will give John \$50." If John demands payment from Bill without doing the work, he has misunderstood the qualifier. He could contend that Bill said: "I will give John \$50." Even though, technically speaking, John's quotation is correct, his argument would fail because he disregarded the qualifying statement: "If John works for eight hours." Without the first condition being met, the person making the statement is not responsible for fulfilling the second condition.

The skeptic readily understands this concept, since it must be incorporated to understand the skeptic's own writings. For instance, Dan Barker, in *godless*, included a chapter titled "Dear Theologian." The chapter is a satirical letter supposedly from God to theologians. In that chapter, Dan has God saying: "I created the universe with all kinds of natural laws that govern everything from quarks to galactic clusters" (2008, p. 149). Are we to conclude that Dan really believes that God created the world

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and its natural laws? Of course not. We must qualify Dan's statement by saying that he does not really believe in God, and that his "letter" is satire. Again, in *godless*, Dan made the statement: "What has theology ever provided? Theology has given us hell" (p. 220). From Dan's statement, should we conclude that Dan really believes in hell and that he credits theology with originating it? Certainly not. Dan does not believe in heaven, hell, God, or Satan. Whatever statements a person chooses to pick out of Dan's book to "prove" he believes in God or hell must be qualified by other statements elsewhere in his books, other writings, or debates that show he certainly does not believe in the existence of God or hell. In a similar way, even a superficial reading of the New Testament shows that many of Jesus' statements concerning prayer are qualified by certain criteria that must be met in order for that prayer to be effective.

### IN THE NAME OF JESUS

A systematic study of everything the Bible says on prayer is beyond the scope of this article. A look at a few Bible verses on the topic, however, will show that the skeptics' attack on

prayer is ill-founded and vacuous. In truth, John 14:14, one of the skeptics' favorite verses to quote along these lines, can be used to show one of the primary "qualifying" concepts concerning prayer. In that verse, Jesus told His disciples: "if you ask anything **in My name**, I will do it" (emp. added). It is extremely important that we understand how the Bible uses the phrase "in Jesus' name." The way the skeptic understands this verse, the phrase means that as long as a person puts the words "in Jesus' name" at the end of a prayer, then God is obligated to answer that prayer positively. Attaching Jesus' name on the end of a prayer, however, is not what the Bible means when it says that a prayer is to be offered "in Jesus' name." The phrase "in Jesus' name" means that whatever is being said or done must be done **by the authority** of Jesus. Earnest Bible students have long understood this to be the proper use of the phrase. In fact, Colossians 3:17 makes this clear: "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." This verse does not mean that you should proclaim before every action or sentence that what follows is being done "in Jesus'

name." It means that whatever actions are taken or words are spoken should be **in accord with Jesus' teachings and by His authority**.

To illustrate, suppose a man bangs on your door and yells: "Open this door in the name of the Law." Should you open the door for this man? That depends. If he truly is a policeman who has a warrant and has been authorized by the government to enter your house, then you should. However, if he is a civilian off the street who simply added the phrase "in the name of the Law" to his sentence to make it sound more forceful, then you should not open the door. The phrase "in the name of the Law" only has force if the person using it is actually authorized by the government to perform the action. In the same way, the phrase "in Jesus' name" (or "in the name of Jesus") only has power if what is being prayed for truly is authorized by Jesus. For instance, if a person prayed, "Lord, please forgive me of my sins even though I will not forgive others of their sins, in Jesus' name, Amen," would Jesus comply with such a request? No, because He explained that God will forgive only those people who are willing to forgive others (Matthew 6:14-15). Including the phrase "in Jesus' name" does not give a prayer some magical power that allows the request to bypass the authority and teachings of Christ.

In the book of Acts, we see an extremely effective illustration of this truth. Paul, Peter, and the other apostles were preaching and doing miracles "in the name of Jesus." Their healing activities were authorized by Christ, and their message was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Seeing how effectively Paul accomplished such miracles, "some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying 'We adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches'" (Acts 19:13). The itinerant Jewish exorcists had fallen into the same mis-

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understanding as the modern skeptic. They thought that by simply tacking Jesus' name onto their activities, that would qualify as doing things "in Jesus' name." The result of their misuse of Jesus' name quickly became apparent. When seven sons of Sceva attempted to invoke Jesus' name, the evil spirit answered: "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded" (Acts 19:14-16). Simply adding Jesus' name to actions or requests that Jesus has not authorized does not qualify as doing something "in Jesus' name" as the Bible instructs. [NOTE: Even though the skeptic does not believe the story in Acts to be true, he cannot deny that the story provides a valid illustration and explanatory commentary on what the Bible means by saying or doing something "in Jesus' name." If the skeptic is going to attack the Bible's position on prayer, he or she must allow the Bible to explain itself.]

### ACCORDING TO GOD'S WILL

**I**t is inexcusable for a person to attack the Bible's position on prayer, but then to avoid many of the paramount concepts associated with the Bible's teaching on the subject. You can know that any person who pulls verses out of context about prayer, and does not turn to primary passages, such as Matthew 6:9-15, is either unaware that such passages are in the Bible, or is intentionally being intellectually dishonest. If you really want to know what Jesus taught on prayer, you simply must consider **all** that He taught about prayer, not just the few scattered verses skeptics want to rip from their contexts.

In Jesus' instructions to His disciples regarding prayer, He explained that they should include in their prayers the idea that God's will should be done (Matthew 6:10). The apostle John, who would have been well-aware

of Jesus' teaching on prayer, stated: "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything **according to His will**, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him" (1 John 5:14-15, emp. added). Notice that if we do not include verse 14 of 1 John 5, we could make the passage say, "whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him." Yet to do that would be to leave off the important qualifying statement that the request should be in accordance with God's will, and should be offered from a heart that is humble enough to accept God's will—even if that means that the request is denied. When the skeptic pulls snippets of verses from the gospel accounts concerning prayer, he or she is guilty of leaving off just such important qualifying information.

When we consider the idea of praying "according to God's will," we can see how important this qualifier is. No requests will be granted that attempt to violate or circumvent God's ultimate will. For instance, suppose a person were to pray: "God, please save my mother even though she does not believe in Jesus Christ and refuses to repent of her sins, please let her go to heaven anyway, in Jesus' name, Amen." Would God grant that petition? The Bible is clear that He certainly would not, because to do so would be to violate His ultimate will that salvation is through the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12).

Furthermore, certain events and actions in this physical world are required for God to accomplish His will on this Earth. For instance, if one of Jesus' apostles had asked God to spare the life of Jesus and not let Him die on the cross, that request would not have been in accord with God's ultimate will and would not have been answered in the affirmative. Mark 8:33 provides an excellent example of this when Peter rebuked

Jesus for predicting His own death. Jesus responded to Peter, saying: "Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Whereas Peter most likely thought his actions were in accord with God's will, they were not. To further illustrate, the many events in the life of the Old Testament character Joseph may have seemed unfair at the time. No doubt Joseph prayed to be freed from slavery or to be released from jail. But at the end of Joseph's life, we see that God's will was to make him a great leader in Egypt and to save the Jewish nation through him. Joseph recognized this, and said to his brothers who had sold him into Egypt: "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Genesis 50:20). Joseph's slavery and incarceration were the vehicles by which God brought Joseph to power, accomplishing His will.

### The Skeptic's Response

Knowing that the Bible plainly teaches that prayer must be according to God's will, Dan Barker has attempted to respond. He stated: "It does no good to claim that many prayers are unanswered because they are not 'according to his will.' Even prayers that are clearly in line with the expressed 'will of God' are rarely successful. Even if this reasoning were valid, it makes prayer useless as a means of changing nature" (1992, p. 108). First, it should be noted that Dan often **conveniently neglects** to inform his audiences that he knows the Bible includes statements that qualify Jesus' statements that Dan and his fellow skeptics take out of context. Second, notice that Dan made sure that he included the phrase "the **expressed** 'will of God.'" The question then arises, does God have certain plans that He has not expressed to humans, but that are part of His will on Earth?





Absolutely. Moses wrote: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 29:29). Is there any indication that God revealed to any humans His plans for Joseph before they were carried out? No. Is there any indication that God told any humans about His conference with Satan and His plan for Job prior to the events? None. Is God obligated to express to humans all the various facets of His will? Certainly not. That is one of the points Jesus was attempting to make in His teachings on prayer. Even though we may not know the specific will of God for our lives, we must pray with a heart that is ready to accept the events God allows, understanding that God has a will to which we are not always privy.

Notice that Dan is forced to concede the point, but then attempted to attack prayer from a different angle when he stated: “Even if this reasoning were valid, it makes prayer useless as a means of changing nature” (1992, p. 108; see also Templeton, 1996, p. 147). It is important to be clear that once the skeptic is honest enough to admit that certain qualifications do apply to prayer, he must alter the entire argument against it. Instead of the Bible’s position being internally inconsistent or at odds with reality, the skeptic must drop back and demand that, even though it **cannot be proven to be such**, it is “useless.”

Again, however, the skeptics’ assertion that praying according to God’s will renders the prayer useless to change nature is groundless. Could it be possible that multiple outcomes to certain events or situations fit into God’s will? Surely. To illustrate, suppose that a father was getting a child a drink from the refrigerator. The father had various nutritious options from which to choose including juice, milk, or water. Could the child request

water and that option be according to the father’s will? Sure. If the child requested juice, could that option be equally as acceptable as water? Yes. But suppose the child requested something not in the refrigerator, or something harmful to drink. While those options would be outside the father’s will, the other three choices of milk, water, or juice would all be possibilities. Thus, if the child wanted juice, and asked for it, then the child’s request (prayer) would be effective. [NOTE: The skeptic may attempt to say that since God knows everything, He should know what His children want before they ask. But the Bible articulates this very point in Matthew 6:8. While it is true that God knows everything (Psalm 139:1-6), it is also true that God has instructed His children to ask for what they desire (Matthew 7:7). Numerous reasons could be given for why God wants His children to present their requests to Him. One is simply that God wants humans to understand their dependence on Him (Acts 17:28).]

To illustrate, there are several biblical examples in which God’s will for people involved considerable latitude in what He could allow to happen. For instance, 2 Kings 20:1-11 gives us the story of Hezekiah’s terminal sickness. The prophet Isaiah informed Hezekiah that he was going to die. Hezekiah then turned his face to the wall and prayed that the Lord would extend His life. The Lord listened to his prayer and extended Hezekiah’s life for fifteen years. Here we have an example of two outcomes both of which were consistent with God’s will on Earth: Hezekiah living and Hezekiah dying. Without Hezekiah’s prayer, he would have died of his sickness. Because of his prayer, however, God intervened and allowed Hezekiah to live. Contrary to the skeptics’ false assertion, Hezekiah’s prayer certainly did have the power to “change nature.” It is also interesting to note that Hezekiah’s sickness was

healed through natural means. Isaiah instructed the king’s attendants to place a poultice of figs on Hezekiah’s boil. When they did so, Hezekiah recovered. This story provides an excellent example of a person who prayed according to God’s will. That prayer drastically altered nature, and God worked through natural means to accomplish His purpose. [NOTE: While the skeptic may refuse to accept the truthfulness of this Bible story, he cannot refute the fact that the story provides at least a theoretical explanation as to how a person could pray in accordance with God’s will and alter the course of nature.]

### BELIEVING YOU WILL RECEIVE

**A**nother widely recognized qualification for effective prayer is that the one praying must honestly believe that God can and will grant the prayer, if it is according to His will. As Jesus stated in Matthew 21:22: “And all things, whatever you ask in prayer, **believing**, you will receive” (emp. added). Of course, this verse does not mean that believing is the only prerequisite for having a prayer answered. Factors that we have mentioned such as asking by the authority of Jesus and according to God’s will (as well as others we will mention later in the article) are necessary as well. But this verse and others teach us that belief is a necessary component of effective prayer. According to James 1:5-8:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. **But let him ask in faith, with no doubting**, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways (emp. added).

It is often the case that the skeptic will contend that millions of good Christian people regularly pray for things that they do not receive. The





## Evolutionary Theory Changes Its Tune...Again

Eric Lyons, M.Min.

The song has been playing like a broken record for decades: “Evolution is true. Evolution is a fact. Evolution is true. Evolution is a fact...” As long as this mantra is repeated by enough intellectuals, it seems many will become and/or remain enamored with evolutionary theory—even when the underlying evidence is shown continually to be inadequate and at odds with reality. Many evolutionary-laden science textbooks declare that natural selection (e.g., English peppered moths), mutations, embryology, homology, the fossil record (e.g., the horse “family tree”), etc. all prove the General Theory of Evolution. In actuality, **none** of these proves what evolutionists claim. Creationists recognize the fossil record, similarities among living things, natural selection, and mutations, but we have observed **nothing** that proves humans descended from amphibious creatures that crawled out of the water hundreds of millions of years ago. The fact is, evolutionists’ “proofs” are simply **assertions**. Their theory is merely a twisted **interpretation** of the physical world. What’s more, their “story” changes from one year to the next—and sometimes one day to the next.



Many evolutionists believe that birds evolved from the most famous of the dinosaurs, *Tyrannosaurus Rex*

Consider evolutionists’ assertions regarding the origin of birds. A 1989 Earth Science high school textbook declared: “The fossil record **clearly shows** that the immediate ancestor of this bird [*Archaeopteryx*—EL] was a dinosaur” (Namowitz and Spaulding, p. 565, emp. added). In 1994, Prentice Hall published a widely used middle school textbook titled *Evolution: Change Over Time*. Adjacent to a chart showing

how long ago birds supposedly evolved from dinosaurs, the editors placed these words: “[B]iologists think that birds are actually modern-day dinosaurs. Current theory indicates that birds evolved from the most famous of the dinosaurs, *Tyrannosaurus rex*” (p. 67). Only last year, evolutionary scientists in China confidently affirmed that “birds evolved from dinosaurs” (“Feathered Fossils...,” 2009), and just last month we reported how evolutionary scientists writing in *Nature* magazine allegedly “confirmed” (yet once again) that birds evolved from dinosaurs (Butt, 2010).

Shortly after this most recent dinosaur-to-bird article was published in *Nature* this past January (Zhang, et al., 2010), an article by Oregon State zoologist John Ruben appeared in the pro-evolutionary journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. What’s different about this story? For starters, Ruben acknowledged in the first line of the article that “new fossils, and reinterpretations of well-known fossils, sharply at odds with conventional wisdom never seem to cease popping up” (2010). Furthermore, he admitted to the “vagaries of the fossil record,” declaring what creationists have been affirming for years: “current notions of near resolution of many of the most basic questions about long-extinct forms **should probably be regarded with caution**” (2010, emp. added). “Even **major aspects** of paleobiology of intensely studied, recently extinct taxa (<10,000 yrs.) remain unresolved” (Ruben, emp. added).

One “major” unresolved aspect of paleobiology that Ruben addressed was the origin of birds. Although “many scientific and lay communities,” including countless public school textbook editors, have been championing for decades that birds are “living dinosaurs,” Ruben urged readers to put the brake on this bandwagon. First of all, “very recent data

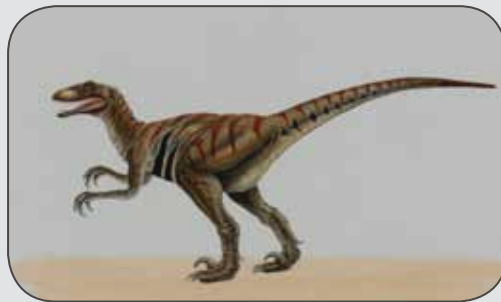


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suggest that many clearly cursorial theropods [ground dwelling dinosaurs—EL] previously thought to have been feathered may not have been” (Ruben; cf. Lingham-Soliar, et al., 2007, 274:1823-1829; see also Butt, 2010). What’s more, “the group that birds are **assumed** to have been derived from, may not even have been dinosaurs” (Ruben, emp. added)! Even though for many years, innumerable impressionable minds have been taught the “factuality” of dinosaur-to-bird evolution, evolutionary zoologist John Ruben says this was **only an assumption**. Scientists have never proven that dinosaurs evolved into birds. In fact, based upon recent model glide tests done by several scientists around the country (see Alexander, et al., 2010), a growing number of evolutionists appear to be “broadly at odds with one another” (Ruben).

Evolutionary theories regarding bird-origins are contradictory, plain and simple. Some contend, “The evidence shows that birds evolved from dinosaurs,” yet others are drawing “totally different” conclusions (“Challenge to Dino-Bird...,” 2010)—based upon the same evidence. Although dinosaur-to-bird theorists have “insisted...that the debate is all over and done with,” Ruben has stated that “this issue isn’t resolved at all. There are just too many inconsistencies with the idea that birds had dinosaur ancestors” (Viegas, 2010). Instead, Ruben believes that “the evidence is finally showing that these [raptors] which are usually



considered dinosaurs were actually descended **from** birds, not the other way around” (as quoted in “Challenge to Dino-Bird...,” 2010, emp. added, bracketed item in orig.).

Ruben is correct about one thing: the often-parroted claim that dinosaurs evolved into birds is merely an assumption (and a wrong one at that!). Yet, Ruben and others are sadly mistaken that **birds** evolved **into** dinosaurs.

Both of these conclusions are simply unjustified, unproven interpretations of the fossil record. The fossil record in no way proves evolution. Dinosaurs never evolved into birds and birds never evolved into dinosaurs. God created these animals on days five and six of Creation... and no fossil has ever contradicted this fact.

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skeptic usually stresses that the people truly believed that they would receive them, and yet their prayers were ineffective. The skeptic claims to know for a fact that the petitioners in question honestly believed their prayers would be answered positively. Yet it must be stressed that the skeptic has no possible way of knowing who, in their hearts, truly believes that God will answer their prayers. Even some who claim to believe in the outcome could be harboring doubts about God's power and promises in regard to prayer. In truth, a person would need to be able to search people's hearts and minds to be an accurate judge of belief. And since the Bible explains that only God is capable of knowing the secrets of the heart (Psalm 44:21), then only He would be in a position to gage a person's true belief. While it is true that other factors such as praying according to God's will and by the authority of Christ influence the effectiveness of prayer, it is also true that fervent belief in God's willingness and ability to answer a prayer are also necessary for the prayer to be successful.

### THE PRAYER OF A RIGHTEOUS PERSON

**T**he Bible writers stress throughout the text, from the Old Testament to the New, that sinful, rebellious people should not expect to have God answer their prayers in a positive way. Only penitent, obedient followers of

Christ are promised God's listening ear and His active hand in their lives. As James 5:16 states: "The effective, fervent prayer of a **righteous** man avails much" (emp. added). Peter stated:

He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking guile; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil (1 Peter 3:10-12).

The unnamed blind man Jesus healed summarized this position well when he stated: "Now we know that God does not hear sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him" (John 9:31). The writer of Proverbs noted: "The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous" (15:29).

The book of Ezekiel provides further evidence that humility before God is a required element of effective prayer. During Ezekiel's day, the elders and leaders of the Jewish nation had begun to worship idols. Yet, in their troubled times, they also attempted to seek the true God along with their idols. Ezekiel 14:1-4 states:

Now some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me. And the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them

that which causes them to stumble into iniquity. Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them? Therefore speak to them, and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God: "Everyone of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him who comes, according to the multitude of his idols, that I may seize the house of Israel by their heart, because they are estranged from Me by their idols."'"

The Bible clearly and plainly teaches that those who are not faithfully following God are not promised an answer to their prayers. It should also be noted along these lines that, although many people feel that they are faithful followers of Christ, they have not obeyed God's will (see Lyons and Butt, n.d.). As Jesus stated:

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" (Matthew 7:21-23).

It is often the case that a bulk of the people that skeptics claim are faithful followers of Christ simply have not obeyed God and, according to the Bible's teachings, should not expect Him to answer their prayers because of their rebellious lives.

### SELFISH MOTIVES AND DESIRES

**S**uppose that a person prays that God will give him ten thousand dollars every day for the rest of his life **so that he can spend that money only on himself to gratify his physical pleasures**. Even if he adds the phrase, "in Jesus' name" to the end of that prayer, and honestly believes that God will answer the prayer, is God obligated to comply with such a request? The way the skeptic has twisted the Scriptures,

## SPEAKING SCHEDULES

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he or she must contend that God is bound to grant such an absurd appeal. Yet an elementary understanding of the biblical doctrine of prayer quickly sets such a conclusion on its head. One of the key concepts regarding prayer centers on the reason for which the petitioner is making the request. If the one making the request is driven by selfish, impure motives, then he or she cannot expect God to grant the plea. James made this point abundantly clear when he wrote: “You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may **spend it on your pleasures**” (4:2-3). Selfish ambitions unmotivated by a sense of spiritual concern nullifies the effectiveness of prayer.

Acts 8:9-25 provides an adequate illustration of this truth. In this passage, a man named Simon had been practicing sorcery in the city of Samaria. Many of the Samaritans had been convinced by his deceptive, “magic” tricks. When Philip visited the area, however, and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a host of the Samaritans believed and obeyed the truth, including Simon the sorcerer. After a while, the apostles came to the area and laid their hands on some of the disciples for the purpose of imparting spiritual gifts to them. When Simon saw this power, he offered the apostles money, requesting to purchase the ability to give people spiritual gifts. He had not purged himself of old habits of selfish ambition. Peter rebuked Simon and explained that he needed to repent and beg God to forgive him for the wicked thoughts and intents of his heart. Simon’s request for the power to impart the gifts of the Holy Spirit was denied, not only because it violated the will of God, but also because it apparently was issued out of purely selfish motives.

Jesus further documented the fact that prayers which issue from selfish motivations will not be effective. In the Sermon on the Mount, He stated: “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward” (Matthew 6:5). The hypocrites’ showy prayers designed to garner public approval negated the effectiveness of their requests.

### PERSISTENCE

**T**he persistence of the petition is another factor that the Bible indicates has a bearing on the efficacy of prayer. In Luke 18:1, the gospel writer stated: “Then He [Jesus—KB] spoke a parable to them, that men **always ought to pray** and not lose heart” (emp. added). The parable Jesus told in this context was about a widow who made a request to an unjust judge. Her request was noble and right, but the unjust judge did not feel obligated to comply with her appeal. Due to her persistence, however, and her “continual coming” to the judge, he finally granted her petition. Jesus then commented that if an unjust judge can be swayed by persistence, how much more effective is the persistent prayer of a virtuous person when addressed to the righteous Judge of all the Earth.

Additionally, Jesus told of a man who visited his neighbor at midnight requesting bread to feed a guest. Initially, the neighbor refused the request, but eventually he complied. Jesus stated: “I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet **because of his persistence** he will rise and give him as many as he needs” (emp. added). Jesus then coupled this parable with the instructions to be persistent in requests to God (vss. 9-13). In fact, throughout the Scriptures, persistence plays a prominent role in effective prayer (see Philippians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Ephesians 6:18; Luke 2:37).

### THE PRAYER EXPERIMENT

**I**n *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins caustically attacked the concept of the effectiveness of prayer to accomplish any real world results. He focused primarily on a “prayer experiment” in which approximately 1,800 heart patients were divided into three groups: “Group 1 received prayers and didn’t know it. Group 2 (the control group) received no prayers and didn’t know it. Group 3 received prayers and did know it” (2006, p. 66). The results of the experiment suggested that the prayers that were offered for groups 1 and 3 did not favorably affect the successful results of their surgery or recovery. Dawkins focused on these negative results, insinuating that such an experiment proves that prayer is useless and the Bible’s teaching on the topic is at odds with reality. Dawkins quoted one of the religious people who had offered some of the prayers, who stated that the results did not dissuade him from his belief in the efficacy of prayer. Dawkins then sarcastically retorted: “Yeah, right: we know from our faith that prayer works, so if evidence fails to show it we’ll just soldier on until finally we get the result we want” (2006, p. 66).

Dawkins assessment of the experiment, however, shows a glaring ignorance of the Bible’s true position concerning prayer, and a complete failure to approach the subject with any type of scholarly rigor. Every critique of a scientific experiment must certainly include a knowledge and understanding of the factors that would “skew” the results of the study. For instance, if the Bible plainly says that the prayers of a righteous person and those of an unrighteous person differ in their efficacy, then such information must be considered in order for an accurate assessment of any prayer experiment to take place. Furthermore, if the Bible specifically details that the motives driving a particular request



have a bearing on the answer, then the “experimental” format in which the prayers were offered would itself be called into question and would adversely affect the accuracy of the report. In addition, if the Bible clearly states that those who are praying must truly believe that God, according to His will, will comply with the request, then the level of belief held by each of the members in the “prayer groups” must be factored into the critique of the experiment.

Please do not misunderstand what I am saying. It is impossible to know or compare the faithfulness of a prayer group, much less each individual’s level of belief. Nor would it be feasible to attempt to study the various lives of the ones who were being prayed for and try to systematically document how their health or sickness would factor into God’s will on this Earth. I am not suggesting that the experiment could have been arranged better so that more accurate results could have been obtained. A negative result to prayer cannot prove that prayer is ineffective, but only that at least one of the biblical criteria was lacking. I am suggesting, however, that Dawkins’ failure to comprehensively view the Bible’s qualifications about prayer, and his dishonest (or ignorant) glossing over of the true facts concerning prayer, would not be tolerated in any critique of a scientific experiment, and should be shown to have absolutely no value in discrediting the Bible’s position on prayer. [NOTE: It is unfortunate that even some religious people have so misunderstood the Bible’s teachings about prayer that they would even attempt such an experiment. We would be wise to consider that many people who profess to be defending the Bible’s position on subjects such as prayer are actually doing more harm than good by misrepresenting the truth.]

### TELLING PEOPLE WHAT TO THINK

**In** *Losing Faith in Faith*, Dan Barker discussed a book that

he wrote for children that contained these words: “No one can tell you what to think. Not your teachers. Not your parents. Not your minister, priest, or rabbi. Not your friends or relatives. Not this book. You are the boss of your own mind. If you have used your own mind to find out what is true, then you should be proud! Your thoughts are free!” (1992, p. 47). Noble sentiments, indeed!

But as one digs deeper into Barker’s book, it quickly becomes clear that those sentiments do not find a willing practitioner in the person of Dan Barker. In his chapter on prayer, Barker wrote:

Don’t ask Christians if they think prayer is effective. They will think up some kind of answer that makes sense to them only. Don’t ask them, **tell** them: “You know that prayer doesn’t work. You know you are fooling yourself with magical conceit.” No matter how they reply, they will know in their heart of hearts that you are right (1992, p. 109, emp. in orig.).

From Barker’s statement about what should be “told” to those who believe in prayer, it is easy to see that he does not necessarily believe his previous statement that “no one can tell you what to think,” or that a person should use his own mind “to find out what is true.” In fact, what Barker is really trying to say is that a person should only think for himself if such thinking will lead him to believe that there is no God, or that prayer does not work, or that all religion is nonsense. If thinking for himself leads a person to believe in the efficacy of prayer or the existence of God, then that person should be “told” what to believe. It is not the Bible’s position on prayer that is internally inconsistent, but the skeptics’ attack on the Bible that fails to adhere to sound reasoning and rational thinking.

### CONCLUSION

**To** document the millions of incidents in which people’s

prayers have been answered positively would be virtually impossible. The Bible offers a multitude of examples in which the prayers of God’s faithful followers were answered, and modern Christians could detail countless examples of such in their personal lives. It is true, however, that God does not always respond positively to all those who petition him. The skeptic delights in pulling out scattered verses, misrepresenting the Scriptures’ true position on prayer, and demanding that the Bible cannot be God’s Word, since its teachings concerning prayer are “contradictory” and do not accurately represent what occurs in the real world. A critical look at the skeptics’ claims, however, quickly and clearly reveals that much is amiss with their allegations. It is only the feeble straw man built by the skeptic’s own imagination that can be effectively demolished. An accurate representation of the Bible’s position concerning prayer reveals complete internal consistency and perfect correspondence to real world events. The Bible explains that prayer is not a magic incantation that can be spouted out to accomplish selfish ambitions. Instead, the effective prayer comes from a righteous person, who prays persistently, by the authority of Christ, according to God’s will, out of unselfish motives, believing he or she will receive the petitions requested.

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## NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

APOLOGETICS  
PRESS, INC.

### A.P. SCIENTISTS



Many are those who insist that modern science and the Bible contradict each other. Atheists and evolutionists have long alleged that the God of the Bible does not exist, that the Universe was most certainly not created in six days, nor were the first human beings created by the Creator on the sixth day of Creation week. They scoff at the Bible's report of the worldwide Flood of Noah's day, insisting that the Bible is a book of fables authored by primitive men in antiquity. As a result, they maintain that it contains many scientific blunders, and that its claim to supernatural inspiration has been thoroughly discredited by the scientific community. For over 30 years, Apologetics Press has devoted itself to challenging these allegations by providing sound, logical evidence that demonstrates the existence of God and the divine origin of the Bible. Indeed, since its inception, A.P. has sought to provide the public with scientifically accurate materials that defend the truthfulness of New Testament Christianity.

In keeping with this prime directive, we have endeavored to assemble a select group of faithful

Christians who hold accredited, advanced degrees in the sciences. Is it possible for a person to earn a science degree from an accredited educational institution, to master genuine principles of scientific inquiry, thereby becoming qualified as a legitimate practitioner of "science," and still retain belief in God, the Bible, and Christianity? **Absolutely.** Can that individual then present scientific data that discredits both evolution and atheism? **Most certainly.** A person can attain the highest standards of academic achievement—equal to the world's most renowned atheists, skeptics, and evolutionists—and yet maintain the conviction that God exists, that He has communicated to us via the Bible, and the Bible's depiction of reality is accurate.

A.P. has been blessed with several scientists who are well qualified to speak and write concerning the interpenetration of science and the Bible. Their scholarly articles appear regularly on A.P.'s Web site as well as in A.P.'s flagship publication. See the center spread of this issue of *R&R* for pictures and brief bios of these outstanding scientists. Visit our Web site for more detailed information on each of our scientists, as well as our other staff writers: <http://www.apologeticspress.org/apinfo/writers>.

**Dave Miller**

